

Why aren't the Republicans talking about health?

Health-care issues were conspicuously absent from the 4-day party convention culminating in Donald Trump's nomination as the Republican 2024 presidential candidate. Susan Jaffe reports.



Former US President Donald Trump spent 93 minutes accepting the Republican Party's nomination for president last week, exceeding his own 2016 record for the longest acceptance speech at a political convention. But there was no time to mention major health-care issues such as abortion, the COVID-19 pandemic, medical research funding, the Affordable Care Act (ACA), or the opioid epidemic, to name a few. Yet domestic and global health-care spending consume the largest part of the US budget, according to KFF, a health policy research and news non-profit.

It was Trump's first public appearance since he was injured in an assassination attempt on July 13 that shocked people across the USA and around the world. But the need to prevent gun violence, the leading cause of death for US children, did not merit even a few words. 25.4 million people watched Trump on the fourth and last night of the convention in Wisconsin, after nearly 2500 delegates confirmed him as the 2024 Republican Party candidate for president. Trump's vice-presidential pick, Ohio Republican Senator J D Vance, also avoided health-care issues in his acceptance speech, other than describing his mother's successful battle against opioid addiction.

"A convention may not be the place to solve some of these problems because they are fairly difficult", said Texas Republican representative and physician Michael Burgess, a Co-chair of the US House of Representatives' Doctors Caucus and Chair of the influential House Rules Committee.

"I judge Trump by his actions", Burgess continued, citing the introduction of cheaper short-term health insurance plans, injecting more competition into the ACA insurance marketplace, and appointing three

Supreme Court justices who helped overturn *Roe v Wade's* nationwide right to abortion.

Trump critics say the relative silence on health-care issues at the convention, especially abortion, was necessary to avoid controversy and comply with the convention's theme of unity. "It's toxic for Donald Trump and his allies to keep reminding everyone about the pivotal role he played in overturning *Roe*", Jenny Lawson, Executive Director of Planned Parenthood Votes, said in a statement. "Republicans don't want to discuss abortion because most Americans want to preserve access to abortion", said Andrea Ducas, Vice President for health policy at the Center for American Progress.

Also missing from Trump's speech was the ACA, the 2010 health reform law that Republicans in Congress tried to repeal at least 63 times, which now provides health insurance to 45 million people. "Trump has been all over the place recently on the Affordable Care Act", said Larry Levitt, KFF's Executive Vice President for health policy. Trump now says he wants to make it better and less expensive.

The only mention of Medicare, a government programme that provides health insurance to 67 million older or disabled adults, came when Trump promised to protect it from "the illegal immigrant invasion" threatening to overwhelm the programme when they enrol. But only people who have paid into the system are eligible for benefits. "Undocumented immigrants are often fearful of using the health care system or community health centers", Levitt said, since their status might be discovered.

Trump also promised to find "cures to cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and many other diseases. We're going to get to the bottom of it", he

said, without mentioning details. Joseph Antos, a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, was not surprised that health care received little attention during the convention. The ACA was a Democratic legislative win passed with no Republican votes and "went after the one area that everybody understood", he said. "After you've dealt with [health insurance] coverage, then you have to start getting into details that are really difficult to understand."

The Republican Party platform does not fill in the gaps Trump left in his convention speech, critics say. The 16-page non-binding document has none of the usual detail about the strategies candidates will pursue if elected. It would "expand access to new affordable healthcare and prescription drug options" without further explanation. It claims that abortion can be restricted because "the Constitution guarantees that no person can be denied life or liberty without due process". The implications of an embryo or fetus possessing the same rights as a person is also not explained. But conservative groups and former Trump administration officials provide detailed proposals for achieving many of the platform's goals in Project 2025, a 922-page blueprint published by the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Trump campaign representatives did not respond to multiple requests for details about health-care policies he would pursue if he wins a second term.

"Trump is unusual as a candidate in that he doesn't issue white papers or policy positions so it's hard to pin him down on any issue", said Levitt. "But you can look at Trump's record from his first term to see the roadmap he would likely follow."

Susan Jaffe